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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (MHARRIS AND EAHOPKINS) AND DRL (KLARMAN)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/10/2018
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [ELAB](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: GOT CRACKS DOWN ON MINING REGION PROTESTS

REF: TUNIS 131

Classified By: DCM Marc Desjardins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) After several months, and the March replacement of the regional governor, the GOT took police action to disrupt economic protests in south-central Tunisia. Demonstrators, including labor activists and the unemployed, organized in January to protest high unemployment, inflation and a lack of economic development in the region (reftel). On April 6, additional security forces were deployed to the town of Redeyef in the Governorate of Gafsa. On April 7 and 8, over thirty protesters were reportedly arrested; the majority were unemployed young people, but several senior regional labor leaders were also detained. Human rights organizations reported that security forces used water cannons, tear gas, batons and attack dogs to repress the stone-throwing protesters, leaving many -- including several children -- injured.

¶2. (SBU) Tunisian civil society quickly rallied in response to the arrests. The Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), the opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) and et-Tajdid party, and other groups called on the GOT to release those detained and to use dialogue to find solutions to the protesters' economic woes. Civil society organizations reported that all schools and shops in Redeyef were closed on April 8, with many residents joining the demonstrations. Although the majority of those arrested were released on April 9, the Ambassador, who was traveling in the region, found that GOT security forces continued to block all roads leading to Redeyef.

¶3. (SBU) In a partial sign of reconciliation, the GOT released the remaining protesters on April 10. Abderrahmane Hedhili, a member of the protesters' national support committee and the LTDH, told LabOff on April 11 that while the release was positive, protests would continue until the GOT addressed the fundamental economic concerns of the region. To this end, the support committee, in coordination with other political and civil society entities, has organized a national day for solidarity with those detained on April 13.

¶4. (C) Comment. Many Tunisians remain unaware, even after four months, of the protests in Gafsa and the subsequent arrests. However, the economic strain of inflation and high unemployment remains a problem throughout the country. Yet public protests in Tunisia remain rare, which makes these demonstrations all the more disconcerting for the regime. The Gafsa protests are particularly annoying, as Ben Ali announced 2008 would be the year of youth engagement and has undertaken a major campaign to reach out to Tunisian youth. The extent of the GOT's unease was demonstrated in its attempt to spin the news; on April 10, the official press agency released a statement that citizens of Gafsa praised

Ben Ali's concern for the governorate and called on him to run again in 2009. End Comment.

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